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SUBJECT: Guangdong Humanistic Association Part 2: The
Limits of Civil Society in China

REF: A) Guangzhou 18191 B) Guangzhou 14013

¶1. (U) Classified by Acting Consul General William Martin.
Reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

¶2. (C) Emboldened by government protection in provincial
and national party circles, the Guangdong Humanistic
Association is leading an experiment in civil society
development. The association publishes China's first
privately-owned social commentary magazine ("Citizen"),
which faces financial straits and could face a potential
future political crackdown if it oversteps an unwritten
line. In this second visit with the association's leaders,
Congenoffs glimpsed the political frustration of South
China's intelligentsia and the limits on their abilities to
criticize the government. End Summary.

¶3. (C) On June 29, Guangdong Humanistic Association (GHA)
President, Hao Yuanwen, and his assistant/translator, Yao
Yuanguang, showed Congenoffs the association's headquarters
and described in more detail the organization's brief
history and future plans. Additionally, Hao and Yao
described financial difficulties of China's first
privately-owned magazine, "Citizen" (Shimin), and asked for
Consulate assistance.

History of the GHA

¶4. (C) Hao Yuanwen, President of the GHA, is a retired
military official with 37 years of government service and
33 years of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) membership. Yao
Yuanguang, is an international relations professor at South
China Normal University (for full background of the leaders
and the magazine "Citizen", ref A).

¶5. (C) Beginning in 2002, both men met with senior
Guangdong Party members to persuade them to support the
organization. The GHA leaders needed over a year of
preparation and persuasion before they were ready to launch
the association. Finally in 2003, with strong support from
elderly former Guangdong CCP luminaries to convince current
party leaders, the organization received official
registration with the Guangdong Civil Administration
Bureau. The opening ceremony of the society was held in
November 2003.

Structure and Activities of the Organization

¶6. (C) The leaders showed ConGenoffs their headquarters, which are located on two floors of a building managed by President Hao in downtown Guangzhou (in Dongshan district, which is also home to most senior Guangdong Party cadre and government officials). The office has about 10-12 computers and a full-time staff of 10 people, two of whom are tasked with distributing the magazine throughout China. Citizen's articles are written by the magazine's Guangzhou-based staff, foreign correspondents (in Europe and the United States) and occasionally by guest writers. For example, Yan Jingli, a famous personality from Hong Kong's Phoenix TV, has written two articles.

¶7. (C) The leaders began by describing the formal structure of the GHA. The association consists of: 13 Standing Committee Members, seven Senior Advisors, 13 Superintendents, and 200 regular members. The GHA has four main channels for disseminating information: 1) the monthly-magazine "Citizen"; 2) the "Guangdong Humanistic Gazette" (Guangdong renwen xuebao); 3) a website www.shiminclub.com; and 4) monthly discussion forums. Currently the forums are held twice every three months. Attendance can range anywhere from 20 to 200 members to discuss issues. The forums generally have a keynote speaker followed by general discussion. Some guest speakers have included: Yuan Weishi (Zhongshan University history professor, famous for his "Freezing Point" editorials on revisionist modern Chinese history), Yu Guanyuan (an influential scholars who helped shaped the Central Government's development policies), Ren Zhongyi (recently deceased, former Guangdong Party Secretary), Wu Nansheng (former Guangdong Deputy Party Secretary), and Zu Houzhe (Vice-Minister of Propaganda for CCTV).

¶8. (C) The organization does not have official ties with dissident groups such as the "Rights Protection Movement"

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("Renquan yundong", ref B). Nevertheless, individual members are in contact with dissidents such as Gao Zhisheng and Guo Feixiong. Within the organization, members stay in touch electronically through email and internet blogs. Currently all the association's members are Guangdong Province residents since the registration is with the Guangdong Civil Administration Bureau and does not allow membership from outside the province.

¶9. (C) Citizen magazine remains the most important focus for the group. The magazine has a distribution list of 20,000 "elites" throughout China. President Hao said the bulk of the mailing list consists of names in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong (including senior CCP officials, cadres, and intellectuals) as well as officials in major cities across China.

Government Connections

¶10. (C) Unquestionably, the success and survival of the association is based on the personal "guanxi" (relations) of President Hao. Hao is close friends with the recently deceased, former Guangdong Party Secretary, Ren Zhongyi (known for his liberal reformist policies) and former Deputy Party Secretary, Wu Nansheng. Hao proudly hangs the personal calligraphy of these men, supporting the association's work. These officials were willing to bless and protect the association, with the condition that Hao keep strict control of the group's activities. Hao's extensive CCP and military background lend him the credibility to manage the operation. Hao said, "if the organization were only run by intellectuals, it would have been shutdown very quickly". (Note: Hao has also used this model to found China's first private Environmental NGO, The Guangdong Environmental Protection Foundation, which is also registered with the Guangdong Civil Affairs Bureau. End note).

¶11. (C) Activists from other provinces such as Sichuan and Hunan have sent representatives to the GHA, hoping to emulate the association's success in their home province. According to Hao, none have been successful because they lack the right political connections.

Government censorship

¶12. (C) Virtually all publications in China face government censorship. For example, even the editor of the English-language expat magazine, "That's PRD", based out of Guangzhou, has told the Consulate the magazine must send its articles three days in advance to Beijing for approval. Hao stated, however, that Citizen can publish all its articles without any formal submission process, because of its wholly private status. Nevertheless, Hao realizes that his mandate from Guangdong officials only stretches so far. Therefore, writers are not allowed to write "too sharply." For example, when writing about sensitive topics such as President Hu Jintao's visit to the United States, Hao asks the writers to write in a critical, but not too offensive manner.

Goals and Content of the Magazine

¶13. (C) Both Hao and Yao are highly critical of the "corrupt and inefficient" leadership within the CCP and hope to see democratic change in China come from the bottom up. They called the Communist Party "a corrupt group of vested interests", which is spreading "crony capitalism" instead of socialism. Unable to directly attack the Communist Party's ideology and policy, however, the magazine seeks to comment on the effects of CCP programs.

¶14. (C) Some of the most important topics for discussion are pollution and corruption. One future article idea is to write about the Pearl River, one of China's most polluted rivers. The article follows four reporters as they trace the river's path through four different provinces and describe how the river becomes polluted in Guangdong Province's industrial region. Another idea is to interview important Western leaders (such as the mayor of Paris, or the dean of the London School of Economics), and analyze the efficiency and integrity of their management styles. The magazine also plans to publish children's books on human rights, such as a "Children's Humanity Reading Book" (xiaoer renwen keben).

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Financial Straits

¶15. (C) President Hao has spent his life savings to provide for the magazine. Currently the money for the magazine will last until November for ten issues and the association is looking for foreign businesses to buy ad space. Hao and Yao both admitted that they do not have great business sense and are seeking advice from the Consulate on how to generate revenue. The men specifically asked the Consulate to find foundations in America willing to support the magazine. The leaders are desperate for outside support not only financially, but also politically. Hao said that, in order to censor themselves against a government crackdown, they must broaden the magazine's reach "as fast as possible."

Comment

¶16. (C) The Guangdong Humanistic Association is important because it demonstrates the limits of political and civil society development in China. Any group hoping for social change needs not only good ideas and dedicated volunteers, but also loads of political connections. Hao and Yao bluntly stated that their organization is surviving simply because they have political cover from Guangdong's power elites for now. Thus the campaign to make China a more

equal society necessitates backdoor, unegalitarian methods.

¶17. (C) Although the magazine is fully-private, there are still limits on the extent of free speech. The magazine leaders realize they cannot directly criticize the government in a manner allowed in Western press. Through use of analogy and case-study, Citizen's writers can convey a more subtle and cerebral criticism of CCP policies. However, the truly sensitive topics such as Tiananmen square and the Falun Gong are left untouched.

¶18. (C) Finally, there are also limits on mass organization and outside funding. Because the association has its registration in Guangdong Province, it cannot accept members from outside of the province. Additionally, in the wake of the "Color Revolutions" throughout the Former Soviet Union, China is hyper-sensitive to foreign governments funding civil organizations. Because the GHA is also a registered civil group, it cannot receive funding from foreign governments or political-minded foundations. Working within all of these limits, the GHA is trying to strike a balance between working to reform China and surviving a crackdown. Given their political connections, however, they have an advantage over other organizations.

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